

FINDINGS: Religious freedom conditions in Russia continue to deteriorate. In the past year, the government increased its use of anti-extremist legislation against religious groups that are not known to use or advocate violence. National and local government officials also harass religious groups they view as non-traditional and Muslims through enforcement of other laws. Difficulties include: denials of registration; detention and harassment of members of religious communities; and delays and refusals to permit construction of or grant permits to rent places of worship. Russian officials continue to describe certain religious and other groups as alien to Russian culture and society, thereby contributing to a climate of intolerance. Continued high levels of xenophobia and intolerance, including anti-Semitism, have resulted in violent and sometimes lethal hate crimes. Despite increased prosecution for violent hate crimes, the Russian government chronically has failed to address these serious problems consistently or effectively.

Based on these concerns, USCIRF again places Russia on its Watch List in 2010. The Commission has reported on Russia every year since 1999, but placed Russia on the Watch List for the first time in 2009.

While concerns about the Expert Religious Studies Council established by the Ministry of Justice in 2009 have not resulted in official limits on religious freedom, Russia adopted several policies in 2009 that violate its constitutional provisions on secularism and the equal status of all religions. Specifically, the new official military chaplains and school curricula on religion are limited to the four religions officially viewed as traditional (Russian Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism). Numerous violent hate crimes against members of various religious communities continue to occur. Violent chauvinistic groups have targeted individuals, groups, and judges and other government officials who defend and enforce minority rights. Although Moscow police officials stepped up arrests and prosecution of violent chauvinists in 2009, most other regions lagged behind.

PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS: As part of its “reset” of bilateral relations, freedom of religion or belief should be an important issue in the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship, recognizing that it is both a human rights and security concern in Russia. Although Russia does face genuine domestic security concerns, as evidenced most recently in the March Moscow Metro bombings, the U.S. and international community should press Russia to reform its overly broad law on extremism and ensure that it is not being used against peaceful religious believers, which risks increasing radicalism and instability. The U.S. should implement the “Smith Amendment” of the 2010 Consolidated Appropriations Act to prohibit U.S. financial assistance to the Russian Federation government due to its official policies on religious groups, particularly its wide use of the extremism law. The U.S. also should institute a visa ban and

freeze the assets of Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov due to his leadership of the Chechen armed forces, which the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has found involved in severe human rights abuses. U.S.-funded grants to NGOs should include the promotion of international legal guarantees on freedom of religion or belief, and U.S.-funded exchange programs should include participants from Russian regions with sizeable Muslim and other religious minority populations. In addition, the United States should initiate International Visitor's Programs for Russian officials on the prevention and prosecution of hate crimes. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy toward Russia can be found in the Annual Report chapter on Russia and by following this link: <http://www.uscirf.gov/images/ar2010/russia2010.pdf>